

Review on Annie Murphy Paul's The Trouble with Homework

With the current discussion on homework, you might find this commentary interesting. It appeared in both Today and the Straits Times on 12 September : The Trouble with Homework. The gist of the article is that it is not more or less homework but well-crafted homework that really advances learning. The writer Annie Murphy Paul has listed three techniques :

1. Spaced Repetition : learners retain what they have learnt more effectively when information and concepts are taught in short chunks and then repeated. Apparently the repetition strengthens the representation of that information in our neural networks.
2. Memory Retrieval Practice : this is using a test not to assess what students know but to reinforce it. It appears from this suggestion that short tests could be more effective than homework. But re-shaping homework so that it is not just reading the material but answering a question that requires sieving through the material could be just as effective.

Many of us know that reading something is never as effective in retaining it as when we put it into another form like notes or graphic organisers or mindmaps. (It works - my paraphrasing this article has got me understanding it much better!)

3. The Harder It Is ...: When we work hard to understand information, we recall it better. It seems we signal to our brain that this knowledge is worth keeping. This phenomenon is called cognitive disfluency. The suggestion is to mix up the different problems to be practised, instead of grouping it by type, so that the student's brain has to work harder and as a result, he learns the material more thoroughly.